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ABSTRACT

The paper describes six strategies to help learning disabled students improve their handwriting skills. For each strategy a rationale and instructional procedure are provided. The six strategies are: (1) creating an interest and a reason to improve handwriting skills, (2) boosting confidence by letting students become "role models," (3) use of grips to assist handwriting, (4) relaxation techniques, (5) self-instructional procedures with verbal assists (perceptual prompts), and (6) self-instructional materials with self-monitoring prompts (no verbal cues). (DB)

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Helping Learning Disabled Students Improve Their Handwriting Skills

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Running head: HELPING LEARNING DISABLED STUDENTS IMPROVE

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Helping Learning Disabled Students Improve Their Handwriting Skills

The illegibility of any child's handwriting is a major concern for educators, even in this age of typewriters and computers. Children show a need to be able to communicate through the written word and to feel that they are the transmitters of information that others will be able to understand and appreciate. (Horton, 1970, Giordano, 1984). This is especially true in the case of the learning disabled child, whose needs to communicate are as great as any other child, but whose lack of handwriting skills may preclude his or her message from being understood.

Many learning disabled students suffer from poor self-image and a history of academic failure. The handwriting techniques described in this article are aimed at changing the students attitudes towards their written work, lessening the anxieties and aiding in producing legibile handwriting. This article will detail six strategies to help teachers of learning disabled students improve their handwriting skills. The six strategies to be discussed are: (1) creating an interest and a reason to improve handwriting skills, (2) boosting confidence by letting the students become "role models" (3) use of grips to assist handwriting (4) relaxation techniques (5) self-instructional procedures with verbal assists (perceptual prompts) and (6) self-instructional materials with self-monitoring prompts (no verbal cues). A rationale and procedure for implementation will accompany each strategy.

Strategy 1: Creating an interest and a reason to improve handwriting skills.

Rationale: Learning disabled children tend to have difficulty with their handwriting, making the sharing of written ideas problematic. Letter writing has been shown to be an activity that may stimulate the children to write as legibly as possible (Giordano, 1984; Reetz, 1987). Reetz (1987) found that children introduced to the art of letter writing showed a greater interest in their sentence formation, length of written material and overall legibility.

To overcome the difficulty that beginners have with correct letter writing form, personal letter templates are given to the children.

Procedure: (a) The children are provided with oaktag templates with cutout spaces to show where the date, address, body and the various other parts of the letter should go, so that they can concentrate on handwriting and ideas rather than spacing and margins (Reetz, 1987). (Note: the templates may be eliminated as the children become more confident with correct letter formation.)

(b) Select a group of children from another class or another school to correspond with. Encourage the children to write about things that are important to them.

(c) Let the children share the letters that they receive by posting them in the classroom as a impetus to future letter writing experiences.

Strategy 2: Boosting morale by letting the students become "role models".

Rationale: Besides their handwriting problems, many learning disabled students have a low estimation of their worth as a result of past academic failures. Getting them to write summaries of books for younger children has been shown to motivate them to write legible and meaningful sentences (Giordano, 1984).

Procedure: (a) Suggest to the students that the teacher of a younger grade in their school needs children to write brief summaries of the books that her children are reading in class.

(b) Explain that these summaries will be attached to the front of each book and will help the younger children to make their reading selections.

(c) Let the learning disabled children in the older class read these simpler books (which may be closer to their reading levels) and write a sentence or two summarizing the book.

Strategy 3: Use of grips to assist handwriting.

Rationale: The tension produced by the "knuckle-white grip" seen in many students and learning disabled in particular can often be eased by the use of grips that the teacher can easily fashion in the classroom (Getman,1985).

Procedure: (a) Use a grip other than the small rubber ones used most frequently, such as a large bead or modeling clay, which can be placed around the pencil, causing the fingers to be extended for a more relaxed grip, leading to a natural flow (Getman, 1985).

(b) Allow the children to practice their letters at the blackboard

first to promote the relaxed position of the hand, in large, sweeping movements. This helps provide orientational feedback to the child with spatial difficulties.

(c) Large lined paper can then be introduced, using writing implements with the new, larger grips, gradually ending up with the more traditional lined paper.

Strategy 4: Relaxation techniques.

Rationale: In a study by Carter and Synolds (1974), the suggestion was made that many learning disabled children put so much physical energy into the act of writing, possibly as the result of neuromuscular problems, that their whole bodies went tense with the effort. Relaxation techniques, as demonstrated in the Carter and Synolds study, proved effective without requiring any additional handwriting instruction.

Increased legibility and neatness, both in line quality and letter formation, were been observed as a result of the relaxation training and, more importantly, the handwriting remained stable in later testing. Tension was also seen to visibly decrease.

Procedure: (a) A prerecorded tape with instructions on how to relax, is played to the class with lights dimmed.

(b) The students are then asked to copy from the board.

(c) The procedure, which takes approximately 20 minutes, is repeated three days per week for four weeks.

Strategy 5: Self-instructional procedures with verbal assists (perceptual prompts).

Rationale: This multi-sensory approach to remediating handwriting

has shown to be successful with learning disabled children who have difficulties with other visual-auditory approaches (Hammill, & Bartel, 1986). Studies have shown a great many learning disabled children who verbalized strokes in combination with kinesthetic motions as well as visual and verbal prompting, scored significantly higher than children who had not had this training (Hayes,1982). The technique is designed to call the learner's attention to what he or she has already learned, thus working from the child's strengths and allows the child to visualize and internalize these elements in his or her approach to new classroom situations (Graham, 1983).

Procedure: (a) The teacher writes and describes the letter as the child observes.

(b) the child writes the letter as the teacher describes it.

(c) the child writes the letter, verbalizing the instructions out loud.

(d) the child writes the letter while whispering the instructions.

(e) the child writes the letter while repeating the instructions internally (Meichenbaum & Goodman, 1971; Graham, 1983).

Strategy 6: Self-instructional materials with self-monitoring prompts (no verbal cues).

Rationale: Kosiewicz, Hallahan, Lloyd and Graves (1982) noted in their study of self-instruction and self-correcting techniques that speaking the instructions aloud faded out after a relatively short time. It was suggested that some learning disabled children were embarrassed at having to read the prompts aloud and showing their lack of skill with the task at hand. The use of self-instructional task

cards enable the child to work independently and to be able to silently check the work the teacher has outlined for that days' assignment. This method allows the student to transfer these skills, at his or her own pace, more readily to the other areas of classroom activity (Blandford & Lloyd, 1987).

Procedures: (a) The children are given self-instructional cards to guide their handwriting during a writing period. The cards contain self-evaluation questions, i.e. is my pencil in the proper position?; am I seated correctly?; is the slant of my letters correct?

(b) The child checks the answer on the card to evaluate his or her own estimation of the task he or she has performed.

(c) Reminders are provided at beginning of each session to read the task cards before beginning.

(d) A personal graph is be kept for the child, to show the progress that she or she is making.

Conclusion

The continuing debate over handwriting assessment - neatness versus legibility, cursive versus manuscript - often looses sight of the problems of the learning disabled student, whose more immediate need is to find the skills and motivation to communicate and to develop a sense of self-worth. The strategies discussed here suggest methods that have been successful in remediating the handwriting of learning disabled students. While not every method will be successful with every student, every time, the possibility exists that some of these strategies may help the learning disabled student overcome his or her handwriting deficiencies.

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